

NCA
VOC FOR IOP/FN
BACKGROUNDER NO. 5-5602
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MARCH 10, 1978

MARXISM IN WEST BENGAL

ANNCR:

INDIA'S FIRST COMMUNIST-RULED STATE GOVERNMENT, IN WEST BENGAL, HAS BEEN PRACTICING PRAGMATISM RATHER THAN REVOLUTION, AS WE HEAR IN THIS BACKGROUND REPORT FROM VOA'S SOUTH ASIA CORRESPONDENT, FRED BROWN.

VOICE:

THE COMMUNISTS CAME TO POWER IN WEST BENGAL EIGHT MONTHS AGO AFTER WINNING AN ABSOLUTE MAJORITY IN STATE ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS. WEST BENGAL COMMUNISTS BELONG TO THE COMMUNIST PARTY-MARXISTS, OR C.P.M., A UNIQUELY INDIAN BRAND OF COMMUNISM. THE C.P.M. SPLIT FROM THE MORE ORTHODOX PRO-MOSCOW COMMUNIST PARTY OF INDIA IN 1964 AFTER A DISPUTE OVER TACTICS. LIKE SIMILAR MOVEMENTS IN SOME WEST EUROPEAN COUNTRIES, LEADERS OF THE C.P.M. FACTION SAY THEY WANT TO PURSUE POWER THROUGH THE BALLOT AND WITHIN THE PARLIAMENTARY SYSTEM.

MANY OF THE C.P.M. LEADERS, INCLUDING THE STATE'S CHIEF MINISTER, JYOTI BASU CAME FROM THE MIDDLE CLASS OR LANDED GENTRY AND ARE WESTERN-EDUCATED. THIS BACKGROUND HAS UNDOUBTEDLY BEEN ONE IMPORTANT FACTOR IN SHAPING THE PRAGMATIC ORIENTATION OF THE C.P.M. LEADERSHIP. ANOTHER IS THE MEMORY OF CHAOS DURING THE TWO PREVIOUS STATE ADMINISTRATIONS IN WHICH THE COMMUNISTS RULED AS PART OF LEFTIST COALITIONS. DURING THOSE ADMINISTRATIONS, IN 1967 AND 1969, WEST BENGAL'S CAPITOL, CALCUTTA, WAS RACKED WITH ALMOST CONTINUAL LABOR UNREST. INDUSTRIES FLED THE CITIES, AND A NEARLY TOTAL BREAKDOWN OF LAW AND ORDER CAUSED THE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT TO IMPOSE PRESIDENTIAL RULE.

WITH THESE MEMORIES STILL FRESH IN EVERYONE'S MIND, ONE OF THE FIRST ACTIONS OF THE NEW CHIEF MINISTER AFTER THE JUNE ELECTIONS WAS TO HOLD A SERIES OF MEETINGS WITH BUSINESS LEADERS TO ASSURE THEM THAT THIS WOULD NOT HAPPEN AGAIN. SIMILARLY, ASSURANCES WERE GIVEN TO RURAL LANDOWNERS.

WHILE THE PARTY'S INDUSTRIAL POLICY ANNOUNCED SIX WEEKS AGO CONTAINS MUCH OF THE USUAL COMMUNIST RHETORIC AGAINST BIG BUSINESS, THE STATE'S LEADERS HAVE LET IT BE KNOWN THAT EVEN LARGE MULTINATIONAL COMPANIES ARE WELCOME TO INVEST IN WEST BENGAL, PROVIDED THEY DON'T CHEAT THE WORKERS. THIS STEMS FROM RECOGNITION THAT THE NUMBER ONE PROBLEM FACING THE STATE IS UNEMPLOYMENT. AND TO LOWER UNEMPLOYMENT, NEW INDUSTRY IS NEEDED.

THE COMMUNIST STRATEGY IN WEST BENGAL IS TO RUN THE GOVERNMENT EFFICIENTLY, STAY IN POWER, AND DEVELOP A NATIONAL BASE FROM WHICH TO EFFECT RADICAL CHANGES IN THE COUNTRY. TO ACCOMPLISH THIS THE PARTY IS TRYING TO PROJECT AN IMAGE OF COHESIVENESS, FIRMNESS, AND INTELLIGENCE.

BY AND LARGE, THE NEW GOVERNMENT APPEARS TO BE SUCCEEDING SO FAR. HOWEVER, MANY OF THE ECONOMIC PROBLEMS FACING WEST BENGAL REMAIN NO LESS STAGGERING THAN THEY HAVE ALWAYS BEEN. FOR EXAMPLE, THE EFFORT TO ATTRACT NEW INDUSTRY COULD BE HURT BY THE SHORTAGES OF ELECTRIC POWER NOW PLAGUING THE CITY OF CALCUTTA. AND IF THINGS SHOULD START TO GET WORSE, INSTEAD OF BETTER, ON THE ECONOMIC FRONT, THE PARTY COULD OBVIOUSLY QUICKLY FIND ITSELF IN TROUBLE.